

Draft Mission Strategy for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts

August 9, 2016

Our Vision

We are living members of the Body of Jesus Christ in the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. As Christ offered his body to us in order to bring reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing, so may we offer ourselves in Christ's name.

EMBRACING BRAVE CHANGE

*Stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.
(I Corinthians 16:13-14)*

God is calling to us to look ahead and to embrace brave change. As the role of faith seems to wane and fewer people turn to the Church as a source of solace and strength, more than ever we yearn to know and be known by God and one another. In a world plagued by grievous conflict, injustice, and poverty, God gives us the courage to be agents of reconciliation, justice, and abundance. There will be difficult choices for us as we join in the movement of Jesus Christ. It is only through ongoing prayerful discernment that we will find the path to a stronger future.

Reimagining Our Congregations

*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
(Isaiah 43:1)*

With God's help, we will reimagine our congregations and the shape of discipleship in 21st-century Massachusetts. We will deepen our relationship with God and increase our capacity to speak of our faith. Rooted in a rich and living tradition, we will joyfully and courageously invite all people to worship God, to share the reconciling love of Christ, and to participate in the work of the Holy Spirit.

Building Our Relationships

*From Christ the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament
with which it is equipped ... promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.
(Ephesians 4:16)*

With God's help, we will address painful divisions within our diocese, that we might serve the world worthily as one body in Christ. Blessed by the manifold strengths of all of our diverse members and congregations, we must strengthen the bonding ligaments between individuals, congregations, and diocesan bodies. Honoring the wisdom of our elders and the energy of our youth and working across differences to build each other up in love, we will share our varied gifts with one another and our world.

Engaging Our World

*Just as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.
(Matthew 25:40)*

With God's help, we will continue to engage our world, working alongside our neighbors to share Christ's love through word and action. We will act as agents of God's compassion to those in need. We will work to reconcile ourselves and all people to one another, and all of Creation to God, seeking racial and economic justice, and committing ourselves to the stewardship of our planet.

*Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine:
Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever.
(Ephesians 3:20-21)*

Our Process

In late April, a group of sixteen Episcopalians from the Diocese of Massachusetts began gathering to think and pray together about the future of our diocese. Our diocesan bishop, the Rt. Rev. Alan M. Gates, and our Diocesan Council chose the members of this Mission Strategy Drafting Team to reflect the diverse gifts and backgrounds of our diocese. Bishop Gates and our suffragan bishop, the Rt. Rev. Gayle E. Harris, participated fully in the work of the team.

The team began by carefully considering the Revised Report from the Listening Process, which summarized the primary ideas and insights shared by members of our diocese in seven open and twelve focused listening sessions, over 325 online and phone survey responses, and four feedback sessions. Some key themes that emerged were: a desire to respect and support local congregations as they respond to the challenges of a changing world; a yearning for greater inclusion, connection and collaboration in our diocesan life; and a commitment to justice and service in our local, national, global and ecological communities.

The team also engaged in further research and reflection on the theological grounding of mission; the meaning of Christian identity; the changing demographics of our area; the relevance of the Church in our times; and available models for building relationships, promoting effective evangelism, sustaining organizations, and transforming congregations. The team prayed, shared personal stories, participated in anti-oppression training, and gathered almost weekly for meetings with lively discussions and respectful disagreements.

After three months of prayer and conversation, the team offers to our diocese this Draft Mission Strategy. We invite your feedback, which will help to shape the Proposed Mission Strategy that will be put before Diocesan Convention for approval in November. If adopted, the Mission Strategy will guide our shared work as a diocese for at least three years. In 2019, we will have the opportunity to renew this strategy, revise it, or create an entirely new strategy.

The Mission Strategy will guide the use of our shared resources: the funds in our diocesan budget and the gifts and time of our diocesan staff. Changing an organization as large as our diocese will require wise and creative planning and careful follow-through. To oversee this effort, Bishop Gates and Diocesan Council will name a ten-person Implementation Team to begin work in October. The Implementation Team will work with the staff, lay leaders, and clergy of our diocese to create new processes, launch new programs, and develop a diocesan budget that reflects our mission priorities. The high level of engagement, honesty and insight that our members brought to the listening process gives us confidence that, with God's help, we can become a more transparent, connected, effective and innovative community in Christ.

The Mission Strategy is also an invitation to all of our members and congregations to join in a conversation about our shared goals as Christians and Episcopalians in Eastern Massachusetts. Every community is different, and every congregation can adapt these strategies to match their particular gifts and needs. We need every one of us to take part in our ongoing discernment and the work of living out our goals of transformation, relationship, service, and justice. Together we can bring God's love to Eastern Massachusetts in amazing new ways.

Our Recommendations

As the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, we will embrace brave change by **reimagining our congregations** to better respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our time and place, **building our relationships** to unite as one body in Christ, and **engaging our world** to reconcile ourselves and all people to one another, and all of Creation to God.

In order to make this vision a reality, we will commit to:

PREPARING THE WAY

1. Undertake an open and thorough review of our gifts, resources and programs.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? (Luke 14:28)

In order to be good stewards of the resources God has given us, we must begin by taking stock of our spiritual gifts, our partnerships, our programs and strategic ministries, our staffing and budget, and our governance structures. Our commitment to this mission strategy will require changes in funding and staff time, which we will carry out with compassion and appreciation for what has been done in the past and a clear vision of the future we seek.

Recommendations:

- a) Establish a clear structure and transparent process for regularly evaluating all programs and ministries that receive diocesan funding based on their contribution to the spiritual, relational and practical goals of our diocesan mission strategy.
- b) Assess the ways our current governance structures support or impede the goals of our mission strategy and propose improvements.

REIMAGINING OUR CONGREGATIONS

2. Share the Word of God and our own faith stories with greater confidence.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:15-16)

Jesus calls us to proclaim the coming reign of God's justice and love. When people take the risk to tell their own faith stories and listen well to others, congregations thrive. As we deepen our shared understanding of evangelism, we will be more able to discern together our spiritual gifts and needs as a diocese.

Recommendation:

Commit to a diocesan-wide leadership development effort to equip lay and clergy leaders in the listening and story-telling skills of evangelism, so that all our congregations can learn to share more readily what God is doing in our lives.

3. Address the fact of numerical decline boldly, creatively, and successfully.

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

We envision our diocese engaged in honest conversation about the challenges we face, when many congregations struggle to adequately maintain aging buildings, fund clergy and staff salaries, and support programs. We hope to see both healthy and challenged congregations working openly to discern our role as Christians in a changing world.

Recommendations:

- a) Create a public, transparent, representative body of the diocese to support all congregations in visioning and discernment.
- b) Expand opportunities for lay leaders to develop skills in liturgical practice, spiritual development, sound governance, and financial stewardship, with particular attention to the needs of the nearly half of our congregations that employ part-time clergy.
- c) Designate a funding stream to assist congregations to engage brave change.

BUILDING OUR RELATIONSHIPS

4. Initiate new relationships across our diocese.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isaiah 43:1b)

God promises that each of us is known by name. The heart of church is the experience of knowing and being known, deepening our relationships with God and one another. As Christians we are called to share this gift, constantly expanding the circle of those we claim as our neighbors and our friends.

Recommendations:

- a) Develop a program for congregational teams to visit other congregations, sharing worship and learning about one another's lives (based on the Indaba process of the Anglican Communion).
- b) Model relationship-building activities at all diocesan-wide events.

5. Support stronger collaborations among congregations.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. (Ecclesiastes 4:9)

Our diocese is already enriched by a variety of collaborations: mission hubs; urban/suburban partnerships; gatherings of congregations with shared interests, such as leadership in small churches or engagement in global mission; and other shared ministries. We have seen the power and joy that come from working together, trusting not in our own self-reliance but in the God who calls us to be one body of Christ.

Recommendation:

Add or realign diocesan staff hours to support collaborative ministries among congregations, and between congregations and community organizations.

6. Incorporate regions outside of Boston more fully in the life of our diocese.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:18-20)

In order to carry out our mission as a diocese, we must address the inequities of resources and access that can divide us. In particular, we hope to address the disconnection felt by many of our members who live outside Boston and its suburbs, so that we can work in harmony as one diocese.

Recommendations:

- a) Offer staff office hours at locations around our diocese, so that all lay and clergy members can more easily connect to resources, advice, and collegial relationships.
- b) Ensure that meetings and training opportunities are accessible to members from all regions of our diocese.

ENGAGING OUR WORLD

7. Fulfill the Gospel command to love one another, particularly across difference.

Let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (Ephesians 4:25)

Christ calls us to heal a hurting world. We begin this work by reaching across the lines that divide us, welcoming the stranger and allowing ourselves to be welcomed by those we do not know. In these honest and loving encounters, we learn how to create greater justice and freedom for all. We especially want to respond as a diocese to the racism that tears at the fabric of our nation and our world. We need a deeper and more inclusive conversation about race, and we need to move beyond conversation to visible action towards the beloved community of Christ.

Recommendations:

- a) Enter into a large-scale, authentic, and committed conversation about race with the support of effective facilitators and training programs, in order to move us into the essential work of racial justice and reconciliation.
- b) Invest in ministries with communities of color and immigrants, drawing upon the unique strengths of each community, supporting the health of existing congregations, and reaching into promising new areas.

8. Deepen our relationships with our neighbors in order to work alongside them for a more just and peaceful world.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

Our mission efforts must always begin with strong relationships that break down the divisions between those in need and those who hope to serve. With a basis in mutual trust, our ministries can transform everyone who takes part in them.

Recommendations:

- a) Partner with training programs to help all of our congregations to engage with our neighborhoods more effectively.
- b) Connect and equip networks of staff, clergy, and lay members who share a passion for particular forms of advocacy and service (such as feeding the hungry, caring for elders, ending sex trafficking, establishing global mission partnerships, or supporting veterans).

9. Strengthen our relationship with our Earth and our commitment to Creation Care.

Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. ...In God's hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being. (Job 12:7-8,10)

God created all things and called humanity to live in harmony with them. We are called to join God in repairing a broken covenant with our Earth, creating a more sustainable life for ourselves, for our future generations, and for all life.

Recommendations:

- a) Renew significant funding for diocesan green grants and related programs.
- b) Foster a meaningful long-term conversation about Creation Care in order to inspire all our members and congregations to be more faithful stewards of our physical world.

A Prayer for Our Diocese and the Mission Strategy Process

Lord Jesus Christ, we come before you as a people of God,
seeking to join your transforming work in the world.
Open our eyes to see the movement of your Spirit.
Open our minds to imagine new possibilities.
Open our ears to hear the voices of all your children.
Open our mouths to speak with honesty and love.
Open our hands to share all that we have.
Open our hearts to receive all that we need.
Thank you, Lord, for calling us
as your disciples and friends.
Give us courage to follow where you lead. Amen.